



Bringing Life to the Fairness Principle in Organic Agriculture

An Introduction to the Agricultural Justice Project

By Elizabeth Henderson

Providing farmers with the tools they need to bring IFOAM's Organic Principle of Fairness to life on their farms is a central focus of the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP). This principle states:

"Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.

Fairness is characterized by equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world, both among people and in their relations to other living beings."

AJP has spent years collecting good examples from farmers who have paid close attention to relationships with their workers, and assembled them in a toolkit for easy access. (See the end of the article for toolkit and more resources.)

While the toolkit began as a set of resources to help farms and ranches meet the AJP's Food Justice Certification standards, AJP has been expanding these resources to better help farmworkers, food chain workers, food business employers, nonprofit employers, and all buyers of farm products, regardless of whether they choose to pursue Food Justice Certification (FJC).

The toolkit includes a model employee handbook, with a guide to using it, that a farm can download and quickly adapt for use. The farmers at Foxtail Farm, in Osceola, WI, had glowing reviews for AJP's resources and reported having a much better season "with a lot more understanding and joy between everybody."

Mud Creek Farm in Victor, NY, and Little Seeds Gardens in Chatham, NY, have adapted the AJP handbook conflict resolution process for use on their own farms and train all employees in how to use it as an essential part of their worker orientation.

The toolkit also helps farmers to understand "at-will" employment so that they can commit to terminating employees only for just cause.

Farmer-educator Nancy Vail of California-based Pie Ranch (Food Justice Certified since 2013) reflects, "AJP is doing what everybody should be doing in agriculture, what organic certification should be doing...FJC helps us figure out how we set up systems so that we have fairness, transparency, and accountability at the center of our businesses. AJP works closely with farmers to get [them] up to speed."

With a lot of support from Pie Ranch and Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, NY, AJP has created an easily adaptable guide to making a comprehensive health and safety plan and training employees in its use.

Since paying living wages is essential to being a fair employer, the toolkit includes resources to help farmers calculate the prices and revenues needed and a guide to calculating living wages for your area. To generate revenues for living wages, New York-based Roxbury Farm created a highly participatory and efficiently-run CSA with over 900 shares, delivering to 17 member-run sites in Westchester County, the capital district and NYC.

They also offer meat from Roxbury and another farm that members can order online for delivery with their share. In their words, "We have a guaranteed market for our products and we receive a fair price. This allows us to pay better wages to people working on the farm, use regenerative farming practices, raise our livestock humanely, and to share our farming knowledge with other farmers."

In 2023, Roxbury Farm achieved Food Justice Certification. In a recent CSA member newsletter, farmer Jody Bolluyt shared that, "Of all the certifications we apply for, [Food Justice Certification] is the most important. We can't grow your food without all the skilled and talented people who work on the farm."

Since farmers learn best from the success of other farmers, AJP has been collecting and analyzing farmer strategies for increasing revenues to improve the quality of the jobs on their farms. We highlight effective strategies and will be creating a series of profiles of farms with exemplary business practices, from open books management to collective bargaining to implementations of "sliding scale" pricing that push the envelope for customer relationships.

Our community relationships are fundamental for many of these strategies to succeed. Some farmers have benefited from close relationships with customers who can share access to resources, such as land or infrastructure, that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive.

Another strategy is to create options for higher income customers to pay more for farm produce. Pie Ranch invites farmstand customers to pay a voluntary "food justice tax," that helps the farm cover the additional costs of being a fair employer. Roxbury Farm invites members to contribute to a Financial Aid Fund to subsidize lower-income members. Other CSAs implement a sliding scale for share prices, allowing higher income members to subsidize others while making sure the farm earns enough to be sustainable.

Few organic farmers have experience with unions and there is a lot of apprehension among farmers that any commitment to freedom of association will "wreck" their farms. The toolkit includes some guidance to help understand the value to workers and to the farm when farmers recognize their freedom of association.

Photo Credit: Walter Hergt, Roxbury Farm



Jim Cochran of Swanton Berry Farm, Pescadero, CA, one of the first farms to certify with AJP, discovered that encouraging his workers to unionize had direct benefits for his farm business, "...It's really pretty amazing how detailed [the contract] is. It really is almost like having an HR department. I don't know how to explain it exactly, other than to say that it systematizes things...in a very positive way, I believe, so that the owner can't be capricious about things. And then of course the employees, by participating in the process, really feel some ownership in the process themselves...it's an important part of what we offer as a company...the culture of inclusion and decision-making, and furthermore the sense that the employees have that, that if they have issues that they will get dealt with in some formal way."

Recognizing the challenge of implementing new practices when farmers are busy with the daily demands of production, AJP offers technical assistance to farms of all sizes with free consultations for small to mid-size farms and for BIPOC-owned farms. AJP can help farms improve labor and trading practices even if they don't pursue Food Justice Certification. For farms that qualify, the AJP Social Justice Fund also covers certification expenses if they choose to seek certification.

Leah Penniman of Soul Fire Farm in Petersburg, NY (FJC since 2017) says her farm participates in FJC because they "believe that protecting the rights of workers is paramount along with protecting the earth. What I appreciate about the program is that there is an opportunity for the workers on our farm to be educated about their rights...AJP sends in an auditor to make sure we're not just paying lip service to those values but that they are actively being enacted...The cost-sharing and support for lower income and BIPOC farmers is really essential. FJC makes sure there's validity, and financial support makes it accessible."



Photo Credit: Swanton Berry Farm

The fair practices and policies of the FJC standards promote collaboration between employers and employees, who work together to build successful, safe, and fair workplaces and provide a fair trade framework for farmers and buyers to negotiate fair pricing and build truly sustainable farm and food businesses. Implementing policies and practices on your farm that center on fairness can happen step by step. The toolkit allows you to evaluate your existing policies, or start with a recommended policy that embodies fairness. If you would like help getting started, contact Jon Magee, APJ's Technical Assistance Coordinator, jon@agriculturaljusticeproject.org. 



Elizabeth Henderson farmed using organic practices at Peacework CSA, one of the first CSAs in the country and represents the NOFA Interstate Council on the Board of the Agricultural Justice Project. She often contributes to *The Natural Farmer* and is lead author of *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture* (Chelsea Green, 2007).



Find more resources below from APJ's Toolkit made for farmers, farmworkers, food chain workers, food business employers, nonprofit employers, and all buyers of farm products.

-  **Standards of Fairness**
-  **Farm Employee Handbook**
-  **At-Will vs Just Cause**
-  **Negotiation & Freedom of Association**
-  **Health & Safety Plan**
-  **Living Wages**
-  **Calculating a Living Wage**
-  **Profitability & Buyer-Seller Relationships**

AJP Partner Resources

FJC farms qualify for **preferential vendor status for institutional food procurement** through the Good Food Purchasing Program and other values-based procurement standards. AJP partners with the national Good Food Communities campaign to shift local government procurement to support fairly-produced food and especially BIPOC producers and workers. AJP encourages farmers to connect with the GFC campaign in their region.

AJP also facilitates a **Fair Farming group** on the nonprofit social media platform Ag Solidarity Network, a project of Marbleseed, the Wisconsin-based organic farming organization. AJP encourages interested farmers and farm employees to join the ongoing conversation there by joining the platform and opting into the fair farming group.

